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Washington and the 'Cuban Plot'

For some time, a number of officials in the State Department have discreetly pondered the possibilities of establishing more normal relations with Cuba. They feel, in particular, that though the trade boycott of Castro may hurt him economically, he can use the boycott to blame the United States for any and every economic failure of his own making - and regularly does so.

Lewis H. Duguid of the *Washington Post* - a newspaper that has some close ties with the White House - recently visited Cuba, and reported that in three weeks he saw no evidence that the boycott 'can bring Castro to heel'. The Cubans seemed to be getting all they needed for development purposes - including technical equipment made in the USA. Duguid concluded that the boycott 'shields Castro from his opposition at home', and 'does not appear to be hastening the departure of either Castro or the Russians'.

It is arguable, however, that easing the boycott might at least do the latter, for Moscow appears to be weary of its Western Hemisphere incursion. The reported comment of one Soviet official in Havana, *à propos* the chance of another Marxist revolution in Latin America, was: 'We can't afford the one we've got'.

Duguid's articles hinted that Castro - or perhaps a successor from among the younger Cubans - might be prepared to enter into negotiations over Cuba's 20,000 political prisoners, and over the whole question of Cuban 'meddling' in the rest of the hemisphere - as *quid pro quo* for a resumption of trade with the United States. Cuba's newly diversified agriculture, for example, now produces fruits and vegetables for which east coast

... could be a natural market; at present, much of this produce goes to Canada. And Cuba expects a sugar harvest of between 6 and 7 million tons this year.

Some State Department officials at least are thinking along these lines. There were even modest hopes that, as another Bay of Pigs anniversary approaches (19 April), some official spokesman might be daring enough to put up a light balloon to test the current wind of American public opinion. This optimism, however, has now been largely dissipated by two developments: (a) resurgence of guerrilla activity in Latin America, especially in Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala and Venezuela; (b) the announced intention of New Orleans's ambitious district-attorney, Mr Jim Garrison, to link Cubans with the Kennedy assassination.

Perhaps surprisingly, the first development would not by itself have greatly upset the State Department's more sophisticated thinkers. Washington no longer automatically connects aggressive speeches by Castro with new guerrilla outbreaks in Latin America. It is recognised that the latter are more usually associated with indigenous grievances; and that it is foolish to let Castro take credit for them.

This at any rate is the view of Mr Sol Linowitz, the new American delegate to the Organisation of American States, and it seems to have penetrated fairly deeply. Thus Washington doubts whether the current fighting in Bolivia has much to do with Castro. (It was rumoured, for example, that the guerrillas in Bolivia were being led by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Castro's long-missing right-hand man, and that this explained why 'Che' had been 'underground'. A Central Intelligence Agency man's immediate comment on this was: "Che" went underground all right - six feet'.)

But Mr Garrison's 'Cuban plot' is taken much more seriously. On a warrant issued by Mr Garrison, Dallas police on 3 April arrested Mr Sergio Arcacha, an anti-Castro Cuban who has lived in Dallas since 1963. The warrant accused him of conspiring with Mr David Ferric, the dead ex-pilot who, Mr Garrison says, was involved with Lee Oswald, Mr Clay Shaw and others in the assassination. Mr Mark Lane, the best-known critic of the Warren Commission report, after talking with the New Orleans district attorney, told the newspapers that he is now convinced a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy was 'the serious consideration of anti-Castro Cubans'.

Even if Mr Garrison succeeds in involving anti-Castro Cubans in the United States in an alleged conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy, why should this kill any chance of an improved relationship between Washington and Havana? The answers are two-fold. It is going to be suggested that anti-Castro Cubans plotted to kill Kennedy because they discovered he had a secret arrangement with Castro (which, it is maintained, President Johnson has continued). Alternatively, that Castro had infiltrated the Cubans in the United States with agents who plotted Kennedy's murder, and probably carried it out.

Either hypothesis will serve a political purpose; and it is in that sense that Mr Garrison's 'Cuban plot' is being taken very seriously indeed, by responsible persons in the Johnson administration or persons who were high in the Kennedy administration. Mr Garrison himself is regarded by these people as a man to reckon with, not a mountebank. It is felt that he would not have gone so far out on a limb unless he was fairly sure of being able to produce something quite dramatic in the way of evidence. The Cuban propensity for violence and conspiracy is not underrated. (This month, political foes mailed to a Cuban delegate to the United Nations a book that turned out to be a bomb - which went off.)

The extreme right wing in American politics is busy trying to revive the 1962 Cuba missiles scare. Mr Paul Bethel, of the 'Citizens Committee for a Free Cuba' (Mrs Clare

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on international security last month what he believes the Russians are currently up to in Cuba. He described in confident detail their honeycombing of five or six of Cuba's provinces with 'subterranean chambers' and 'underground bases' which, he said, absorbed all the concrete that should be going to solve Cuba's housing shortage. Entrances were camouflaged by houses and dummy garages, or were inside state-run chicken farms.

All activity was directed from Managua, the main Russian military base on the southern outskirts of Havana. Subterranean hangars housed MiG-21s, which could easily be converted to carry bombs, and could fly over the United States and many parts of Central America and the Antilles. Forty-three military camps turned out 10,000 trained guerrillas each year, for 'movements of national liberation' in the hemisphere. An unknown number of IRBMs that had been brought to Cuba in Soviet oil tankers were hidden in the caves; 42 missiles were taken out of Cuba in 1962, but Mr Bethel pointed out that there never had been on-site inspection - which, in his version, Castro had finally rejected on the advice of U Thant.

Yet, said Mr Bethel, President Kennedy had guaranteed Khrushchev that 'the Russian sanctuary in Cuba' would not be challenged. The State Department clamped down on anti-Castro Cuban exiles instead. But were all the refugees really anti-Castro? 'The United States has virtually no control over who comes out of the island, and the Cuban government puts people aboard planes at its discretion'.

All this may sound far-fetched to readers in both hemispheres, but it could have a bearing on the chances of *détente* between Washington and Havana.

Vietnam: (1) Polling in the South

Perhaps the most significant current development in South Vietnam is the one that is being least publicised: the elections for village councils which are being held each Sunday, up and down the country, for the next few weeks. So far the poll has been remarkably high; last Sunday, for example, over 587,000 out of approximately 718,000 registered persons are reported to have cast their votes. (It may be argued that this percentage is almost suspiciously high; that the impression is spreading - which the government does nothing to discourage - that, in the future, it may be a good thing to 'have had one's card marked'.)

The other side of the penny is the toll from Vietcong terrorist attacks. According to recent - but not up-to-date - figures, five candidates have been murdered and 12 kidnapped in the last two weeks: this apart from what the Saigon government officially described as about 150 'intimidation visits' by Vietcong guerrillas. Probably the real figures are a good bit higher. But the overall picture at this stage is reasonably clear. The peasants, who have been 'in the middle' of all the fighting for the past 20 years, may feel little loyalty towards the Saigon government (many of them have never even heard of Air Vice-Marshal Ky or General Thieu), but they do not want to be ruled by the Vietcong. Given a modicum of security, they are prepared to show this by participating in elections designed to set up 'grass-roots democracy' in the villages.

Although American propaganda will naturally make the most of the successful aspects of the rural elections, most senior Americans are shrewdly realistic about the limited scale of this democratic exercise. If polling can be carried through smoothly in about half of South Vietnam's villages and hamlets between now and the end of the year, or by